

THAI OPPOSITION PARTY WINS INITIAL ELECTORAL SKIRMISH

The government has lost the opening round in its electoral test of strength with opposition elements, but the setback may cause complacent Thai leaders to step up preparations for next year's legislative elections.

The opposition Democratic Party took 22 of 24 seats in the voting on 1 September for the Bangkok municipal assembly. Three recognized government slates managed to elect only one progovernment candidate. The election, the first meaningful one in Thailand in ten years, was orderly and relatively clean, although some cases of government chicanery were reported.

Widely interpreted as an important political barometer, the results could have a significant impact on key legislative elections scheduled for early next year. The Democrats, the only nationwide opposition party currently active, came out of the election substantially strengthened. Out of the limelight for ten years and weakened by the recent death of their leading public figure, the Democrats needed the psychological boost that the Bangkok victory gave them.

Although the Democrats' showing may also attract some other antigovernment elements to rally behind their banner, they have a long way to go before they can expect to challenge the government with any chance of success next year. The party does not appear to have much following in the countryside, and it is clear

that the Bangkok vote reflects the indecisiveness and complacency of progovernment forces as much as it does Democratic strength.

The election is a major disappointment to those elements within the government who had hoped that a Democratic Party defeat in Bangkok, its traditional area of strength, would clear the way for an easy government victory in the legislative elections. Moreover, the setback in Bangkok represents a repudiation of the municipal leadership that has been associated with Deputy Prime Minister Praphat and hence is a particularly bitter pill for the government faction centered around Praphat.

One consequence of the election will be to strengthen the hand of Prime Minister Thanom in the factional wrangling with Praphat. The deputy prime minister is the only Thai leader actively organizing a political apparatus in the countryside, however, and he will have to play a key role in establishing a unified government party.

Although the turnout in the Bangkok election was low and local issues were important, the voting does suggest that there may be more antigovernment sentiment in the country than has been recognized heretofore. The election results indicate that the government will have to put aside its squabbling and marshal its considerable resources to guarantee a clearcut victory in next year's legislative elections.